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General Assembly

Fifty-sixth session

Official Records

94th plenary meeting
Friday, 15 February 2002, 3 p.m.
New York

President: Mr. Han Seung-soo ..... (Republic of Korea)

In the absence of the President, Mr. Balzan (Malta), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Agenda item 125 (*continued*)

Scale of assessments for the apportionment of the expenses of the United Nations

Letter from the Secretary-General (A/56/780/Add.2)

The Acting President: In the letter contained in document A/56/780/Add.2, the Secretary-General informs the President of the General Assembly that since the issuance of his communications contained in documents A/56/780 and Add.1, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya has made the necessary payment to reduce its arrears below the amount specified in Article 19 of the Charter.

May I take it that the General Assembly duly takes note of the information contained in this document?

It was so decided.

Agenda item 32 (*continued*)

Multilingualism

Draft resolution (A/56/L.44/Rev.2)

The Acting President: I give the floor to the representative of France to introduce draft resolution A/56/L.44/Rev.2.

Mr. Levitte (France) (*spoke in French*): First, a technical point. In operative paragraph 9 of the French version of the text of the draft resolution, the words "Dag Hammarskjöld" must be deleted, so that the texts are exactly the same in all the official languages.

I believe that today is an important and happy day for the Assembly. We are all here together in this Hall, representing all the peoples of the world in their cultural, political, religious and economic diversity. This diversity is a fundamental wealth of our humanity. When one says "diversity" in this building, one naturally says "dialogue" — economic dialogue, political dialogue, but also cultural dialogue and, this year in particular, a dialogue of civilizations.

In order to have this dialogue, we must understand one another, and for that purpose we must agree on the question of languages. I think we have

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succeeded in understanding one another, and I am very much pleased to say so. Understanding means, first of all, respect for the other and hearing the other. It is in this spirit that France, along with all the other sponsors of the text before the Assembly, decided twice, on 11 December and 21 December, to delay voting on the draft resolution because we had the feeling that we had not yet arrived at a perfect understanding through this necessary dialogue.

Today — unlike in 1995, when we last voted on a substantial text on the issue of languages and were divided in that vote — I hope that we shall adopt this text by consensus. I say this with deep satisfaction and express the gratitude of France and all the other sponsors to all those who participated in the many informal meetings that gradually led to an agreement.

My gratitude is addressed first to the sponsors themselves, who agreed not to have a vote and to be flexible in the negotiations. They also agreed that the text now before the Assembly should be a bit less exacting on the question of languages. However, this lesser requirement allows us to have the force of consensus. I say to all the sponsors that it seems to me that a less exacting text, adopted by consensus, has greater political force.

The gratitude of France and all the sponsors also goes to all the States that do not have the good fortune or privilege of being represented in the Assembly through an official language. I am addressing myself particularly to Ambassador Yukio Satoh, but also to the representatives of great countries — such as Korea and countries in South-East Asia, countries in Europe and in Latin America — that are not represented in this Hall through an official language and nevertheless agreed to participate with us in these long and good negotiations, which have enabled us to come together today. I feel that we have been able to take their concerns into account in this text.

In addition, the gratitude of France and the other sponsors goes to the English-speaking countries. Though they are represented by an official language, we needed their understanding. We have listened to the arguments of the countries — including India, Nigeria, South Africa and others — for which English is the second, third or fourth language, used for communication, and thus for which the requirement of learning a second official language is a handicap and a heavy burden, since in universities in the developing countries students must concentrate mainly on studies other than languages.

I think I can say that we have also been able to take into account the arguments of this important group of English-speaking countries — in particular developing English-speaking countries of the South — to help us reach a consensus. We have asked them to listen to the arguments of the developing countries fortunate enough to be represented in this Hall by means of an official language — be it Spanish, French, Russian, Chinese or Arabic — for which that official language is also not their first language, but often the second or third language after their mother tongue, their local or regional tongue and is used for communication, as is the case with English in India or Nigeria. We have asked that their problem also be taken into account.

I think that I am in a position to say that that is the case today. It seems to me, therefore, that the text the Assembly now has before it is the product of a genuine consensus.

In conclusion, let me say that this text represents success for each and every delegation. It is a high-quality text that unites us around a common goal: to promote multilingualism as well as the six official languages of our United Nations, with determination and ambition, but also with realism and pragmatism. This message of unity is addressed especially to the Secretariat, which will have to implement this text day by day.

One last word. This text contains two parts, because, apart from the question of the six official languages, we have also heard from those who, like the Ambassador of Papua New Guinea, want attention to be paid also to those languages spoken by ethnic minorities in their own countries. To that end, we have, with everyone's agreement, asked the Secretary-General to report to us on that issue.

This is what France wanted to say to the Assembly. From the bottom of our hearts, we extend our gratitude to all on behalf of all of the sponsors.

The Acting President: We shall now proceed to consider draft resolution A/56/L.44/Rev.2.

I give the floor to the representative of the Secretariat.

Mr. Perfiliev (Director, General Assembly and Economic and Social Council Affairs Division): I should like to inform members that, should the General Assembly adopt draft resolution A/56/L.44/Rev.2 on the implementation of the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report of the Secretary-General (A/56/656), which would be endorsed by operative paragraph 1 of draft resolution A/56/L.44/Rev.2, this would imply a review of those conclusions and recommendations by the relevant intergovernmental organs, including the Committee on Information. Should those intergovernmental organs make recommendations in the context of the review which could lead to additional requirements under the regular budget, a statement of programme budget implications would be submitted to those organs, in accordance with established procedures, as appropriate.

On that understanding, draft resolution A/56/L.44/Rev.2 would have no programme budget implications for the biennium 2002-2003 at this stage.

The Acting President: I shall now give the floor to those representatives who wish to speak before action is taken on the draft resolution. May I remind representatives that explanations of vote are limited to 10 minutes and should be made by delegations from their seats.

Mr. Satoh (Japan): It is indeed a great pleasure for me to speak following the excellent and thoughtful introduction of this draft resolution on multilingualism by Ambassador Jean-David Levitte of France. That text before us represents a consensus reached after two months of negotiations.

I should like to express my heartfelt appreciation to all of my colleagues for their efforts to reach this consensus. Of course, my special thanks go to Ambassador Levitte for his excellent coordinating efforts.

The text of this draft resolution is indeed a great improvement over the previous draft, especially insofar as it contains no language that could be disadvantageous, in terms of employment, to nationals whose mother tongue is not one of the official languages of the United Nations, or to nationals of developing countries where only one of the official languages of the United Nations is taught at school.

In addition, by referring to Article 101 of the Charter and to the relevant General Assembly resolutions, particularly resolution 55/258, this text gives due regard to the principle of equitable geographical distribution, to be observed by the Secretariat in human-resource management.

As recognized in the preambular part of the draft resolution, multilingualism is to be pursued as a means of promoting, protecting and preserving diversity of languages and cultures globally. Obviously, the spirit of cooperation that has characterized our discussion is essential to ensure that such pursuit is productive, and I am therefore very much encouraged by what we have attained together.

Having said this, I should like to conclude my statement by assuring you, Mr. President, that the Japanese Government will continue to work to promote multilingualism in its true sense.

The Acting President: We have heard the last speaker in explanation of position.

The Assembly will now take a decision on draft resolution A/56/L.44/Rev.2.

Before proceeding to take action on the draft resolution, I should like to announce that the Bahamas is not a sponsor of draft resolution A/56/L.44/Rev.2; Djibouti and Somalia are sponsors of the draft; and Nicaragua has become a sponsor of the draft.

May I take it that the Assembly decides to adopt draft resolution A/56/L.44/Rev.2?

Draft resolution A/56/L.44/Rev.2 was adopted (resolution 56/262).

The Acting President: I shall now give the floor to those representatives wishing to speak in explanation of position on the resolution just adopted. May I remind delegations that explanations of vote are limited to 10 minutes and should be made by delegations from their seats.

Mr. Mubarez (Yemen) (*spoke in Arabic*): I wish to thank you, Mr. President, for giving me the opportunity, on behalf of the Arab Group, to make a few brief comments on the resolution adopted by the Assembly with regard to multilingualism.

This item has been very important to the Arab Group since the fifty-fifth session. On behalf of the Group, I should like to note that the Arab States all supported the draft resolution contained in A/56/L.44/Rev.1, even before the amendment thereto,

contained in document A/56/L.44/Rev.2, and that many Arab delegations participated in the presentation of the draft resolution by France. However, the amended resolution does not take into account the views presented by the Arab Group.

The Arab Group would have preferred to see an enhanced approach to expanding work in the six official languages. It would have liked the draft resolution to emphasize the need for United Nations staff to know, as a condition of appointment, an official language other than the two working languages. We believe that it would also have been important for the draft resolution to send a message to the Secretariat that interpretation must be available to all meetings, including regional meetings, and that documents must be provided in all six official languages, in accordance with the relevant General Assembly resolutions. Unfortunately, that is often neglected. The Arab Group wishes also to reiterate its view that it is important for the General Assembly to implement all relevant resolutions, without engaging in selectivity.

The Arab Group considers that part II of the resolution does not set out all the objectives to be pursued under this agenda item. But the Arab Group reaffirms its willingness to cooperate with all other delegations when the Assembly takes up this item at its fifty-eighth session.

The Acting President: May I take it that it is the wish of the General Assembly to conclude its consideration of agenda item 32?

It was so decided.

The meeting rose at 3.35 p.m.